Cornell University
John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Modern Visions of the Medieval and Renaissance World
Author: Cate Mellen

Course: History 100
Course Title: Modern Visions of the Medieval and Renaissance World

Year of Award: Fall 2005

Winner

Fall 2005 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of $500 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar (honorable mentions, if any, will receive $150).

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics (probably for a portion of the course). Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you ready students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

The winner will be announced to the Cornell community, and copies of the winning assignment sequence will be made available to all interested staff.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 9. No exceptions can be made.

Spring 2005 John S. Knight Assignment Sequence Prize Application

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name Cate Mellen

Department History Course # and title 100.31/100.32 Modern Visions of the Medieval & Renaissance World

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the assignment sequence, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I am also prepared to send electronic versions of my text to the Knight Institute (knight_institute@cornell.edu). I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature Cate Mellen Date 12/9/05

Cate Mellen
History Department
450 McGraw Hall
History 100.31/100.32
Modern Visions of the Medieval and Renaissance World
12/09/05

In my first-year writing seminar, *Modern Visions of the Medieval and Renaissance World* (History 100.31 & 100.32), students examine popular conceptions of the historical past through a variety of contemporary media. The goal of the course is two-fold. Students are encouraged to develop the skills of critical analysis, and also to develop their academic writing and revising. It is difficult for me to separate out a particular assignment sequence for consideration by the John S. Knight Institute, however; I have intentionally designed my entire course as an extended sequence of inter-related assignments which all build towards the final essay, which is an 8-10 page research paper on a topic of the student's own choosing.

Our first scholarly essay, a review of Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* (1952), is intended as an introduction to critical analysis. Tey's novel, in which Inspector Alan Grant of Scotland Yard undertakes an investigation into the murder of the Princes in the Tower in 1483, has become a frequent addition to undergraduate syllabi on historical methodology. In the course of his investigation, Tey's detective dismisses much of the scholarly writing on Richard III, preferring instead to go directly to documentary evidence from Richard's day. Before our discussion of the novel, students screen a film version of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the classic depiction of that monarch as a conniving, evil murderer intent on usurping his nephew's position. After providing written responses to a series of questions about the film in their first homework assignment and discussing the figure of Richard III in class, students are then confronted with a completely different interpretation of the life and character of Richard III in Tey's novel. The two homework assignments leading up to the *Daughter of Time* essay are both series of questions for which students

provided relatively short, typed answers, allowing them to direct their thoughts in preparation for the essay. Hopefully, in the essay, students conclude that Tey's model for historical research—going straight to primary sources—is an important one for students of history to follow.

Immediately following our discussion of *The Daughter of Time*, we begin a unit dedicated to the King Arthur and Arthurian legend. One class session is dedicated to an introduction to primary sources—including a list of important questions to ask of any primary source, and a few trial readings of brief medieval documents. Students are then given three selections from primary sources on the life of King Arthur, all written in the twelfth century, and are asked to apply this lesson to their documents in order to answer a series of assigned questions. After this initial practice, our next essay assignment is an analysis of the earliest three fragmentary documents which deal with the life of King Arthur, in order to draw conclusions about the existence of this legendary figure.

Our next essay assignment continued to examine King Arthur, but this time it was his modern rather than his historical character that interested us. Our initial assignment asked students to read one of a series of articles from an *American Historical Review* forum on Film and History, which they were then required to present briefly to their group members in preparation for a discussion on the role history and historians play in the production of historical film. Students were then asked to write an essay comparing two recent films about King Arthur, and to determine whether these films—and medieval film in general—tells us more about modern ideas and values than about the medieval world. After spending several weeks looking at the methods of historical research and the importance (or even possibility) of objective research, students are asked to consider the implications of the appropriation of history by modern popular culture.

This appropriation—and manipulation—of the historical past in modern media was the continued focus of the following essay, which was an analysis of Dan Brown's controversial novel *The Da Vinci Code*. By now, students have understood the importance of reading critically, and are

asked also to look at the issue of historical fiction, and the obligation of its authors to be historically accurate. Though not a historiographical essay in the strictest sense, *The Da Vinci Code* essay asks students to look at the varying presentation of evidence and its interpretations in three separate works, which, I believe, helps to further advance the lesson of critical analysis. For this essay, preparatory assignments included some homework questions, but more important was participation in the Discussion Board on the course Blackboard site—which encouraged debate on a wide variety of subjects addressed in the novel, including the issue of historical truth.

All of these essays taken together, I believe, form an important sequence which prepared my students for their final, and most extensive, essay—an 8-10 research paper on a topic of their own choosing. Students were asked to apply the methods they had learned—of both primary source and historiographical analysis—to their own, individual, research projects.

Were I given the opportunity to teach the course again, there are a few things I would like to change. I would like, for example, to organize a formal debate in the classroom in preparation for the essay on *The Da Vinci Code.* Additionally, I would like to replace some of the homework assignments which consisted of a series of questions with short directed readings. I have considered assigning short reaction papers with a thesis statement already prepared, and requiring the student to write an introduction, and a brief essay, in support of that thesis statement.

While I believe that there is always room for improvement, I believe that my sequence of writing assignments helped students to gain a greater understanding of the tools and methods of history, and the obligations of the historian.

Fall 2005
HIS 100.31/32
Screening: *Richard III*, MON, 9/5, 7:30pm, Goldwyn Smith 134
Date: due by **Wed 9/7** for class discussion

Questions for screening of *Richard III* (due in class Wed 9/7):

1. Is Richard the hero or the villain of this film? Explain.
2. How would you describe Richard?
3. Does Richard's physical appearance have anything to do with his character?
4. How does Richard obtain power?
5. Why / How is Richard ultimately defeated?
6. Briefly summarize what we have learned about King Richard III by viewing this film.

Fall 2005
HIS 100.31/32
Reading: Josephine Tey, *The Daughter of Time*
Date: due by **Mon 9/12** for class discussion

As you read *The Daughter of Time*, consider the following questions. Type brief responses to each of these questions, and bring them to class with you on Monday.

Questions for reading *The Daughter of Time*: (due in class Mon 9/12)

1. Why does Inspector Grant feel the need to look into the history of Richard III?
2. What kinds of evidence does Inspector Grant use to build his case? It might help to keep a list of the steps he takes in moving towards his conclusion.
3. What is the difference between a detective and a historian?
4. How does Grant's picture of Richard differ from Shakespeare's version?
5. After reading this book, how should we now view the life of Richard III?
6. What is the truth? How can it be determined?
7. What is truth? And how does it relate to the practice of history?
(this last is theoretical and problematic— I don't expect you to come up with the definitive answer to this on your homework assignment, but give it a shot)

This novel was published in England in 1952. I am aware that the first several pages of *The Daughter of Time* are dry and possibly confusing. The author makes a number of references to current events that the 21st century American reader might not pick up on. Don't worry about this. Once Inspector Grant sees the portrait of King Richard III (page 29), the story picks up from there.

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Essay # 2
Due in class **Wed 9/14**

Analysis of Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*
(2-3 pages)

Write a 2-3 page essay analyzing *The Daughter of Time* from the standpoint of a student of history.

In this essay, describe first the process of Inspector Grant's investigation into the life of Richard III. What types of evidence does he use? How does he treat these various types of evidence? What conclusions does he draw from this evidence?

Then, discuss the implications of this text for the study of history. For example, what rules of historical inquiry can we learn from reading this novel? What lessons does this present for the use of literary evidence, and can fiction be a legitimate source of historical information? If not, what value can the historian find in the reading of fiction?

Evaluating Primary Sources

The most important tools that historians have to uncover the past are primary sources—documents (or, in some cases, objects) from the time period or event under consideration. If a historian is a detective, primary sources are the clues. Like any source, they can be tricky to understand, and can rarely be taken at face value. Historians do not *read* primary sources, they *interpret* them.

Consequently, there are a number of questions you need to ask a primary source before you can offer an interpretation. Start with the basics:

The 'W's

1. What is this document?
2. Who wrote it?
3. When was it written?
4. Where was it written?

Though these might seem to be simple questions, a single primary source will not always provide answers: an author might be unknown, there might be no date on the document, etc. Once you've established what you know and don't know about the production of the source, move on to try to determine its purpose and meaning:

5. Why was the document written? What was the author trying to accomplish?
6. Who was the intended audience for this document?
7. What questions does this source raise? Or, what **don't** we know about this source?
8. What other sources do we have that are like this one or that give us similar information?
9. What is missing from this source? Or, what else do we need in order to fully understand the source?
10. What are the problems with this source— does it contain bias on the part of the author?

Finally, evaluate the importance of the source for your own research, or for the study of history:

11. Where does this source fit? How does it contribute to my research, or, more broadly, how does it contribute to existing historical interpretations?

Fall 2005
HIS 100.31/32
Reading: Arthurian Tales (3 selections)
Date: due by **Mon 10/26** for class discussion

Questions for reading of Arthurian documents (due in class Mon 10/26):

1. What kind of a man is Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur?

2. How does Wace characterize Arthur?

3. Why is William of Newburgh so upset with Geoffrey (and presumably Wace)? What does William think about Arthur?

4. What can we conclude about Arthur from these three selections?

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Essay # 3
Due in class **Wed 9/28**

Primary Source Analysis: King Arthur
(3-4 pages)

Very few written sources survive from the fifth and sixth centuries in Britain, a situation which poses a great problem for historians and for those interested in the life of King Arthur. You have been given three historical accounts that describe the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain. The first, an excerpt from *The Ruin of Britain*, was written around 540 AD by a British monk named Gildas. The second, dated around 830 AD, is a selection from *The History of the Britons*, by Nennius, a Welsh scholar. The third is a selection from the anonymous *Annals of Wales*— a chronology of Welsh history of unknown date which however was definitely written by the beginning of the tenth century.

In three or four (3-4) pages, analyze these three documents according to the guidelines we discussed in class on 2/15. What can we learn from these sources? How do they aid in our understanding of the historical Arthur?

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Due in class **Mon 10/3**

The Filmmaker and the Historian: A Debate

You will be asked to read one of the following articles. Be prepared to give a brief presentation of the article to the other members of your group, who will not have read the article. I'd like you to look at it from two angles. First, what can this add to our understanding of the relationship between history and film? Secondly, how can we use this article to learn more about the writing process?

What is the author's thesis? Is it consistent from beginning to end? Is it clearly argued? How easy is this article to understand? Do you agree with his assessment of the role of history in film or film in history? Do you see any flaws in the theory, or holes in the argument?

Robert Rosenstone, "History in Images / History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *American Historical Review*, 93, 1988, 1173-1185.

David Herlihy, "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History," *American Historical Review*, 93, 1988, 1186-1192.

Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *American Historical Review*, 93, 1988, 1193-1199.

John O'Connor, "History in Images / Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," *American Historical Review*, 93, 1988, 1200-1209.

Robert Brent Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian," *American Historical Review*, 93, 1988, 1210-1227.

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Essay # 4
Due in class **Wed 10/12**

Arthurian Cinema: Film Review

In his book *Faith in Fakes* (1986), Umberto Eco offered one definition of the Middle Ages as "a pretext... .a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters."[1]

Do you agree with this statement? In 4-5 pages, write a review comparing Jerry Zucker's *First Knight* (1995) and Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004) from the point of view of a student of medieval history. As you write, consider the following questions:

- How does each film present the figure of King Arthur? Guinevere?
- Do the actions of the characters seem appropriate?
- Do the films attempt to accurately reconstruct the environment of the Middle Ages?
- What are the films about? What are the interests of the filmmakers in telling the story of King Arthur? What is the major message of each film?

Be certain to address Umberto Eco's definition of the Middle Ages.

[1] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 68.

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Writing a Historiographical Essay

History is a written record of the events in the past, usually based on primary sources. Historiography is the study of that written record— more specifically, it is a study of the way history has been written, or the history of historical writing. Historiography is not concerned directly with the events of the past, but rather with the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians. Most research papers in history are concerned with understanding past events, for example, "Who was King Arthur?" A historiographical essay, by contrast, is more concerned with the way in which past events have been interpreted by scholars, so one such paper might ask "What are the main points of debate and main schools of thought among scholars analyzing the existence and identity of King Arthur?" The main task in any such paper (also called a literature review) is to identify, compare and evaluate the arguments of each scholar's work to be discussed.

Questions to be considered:

- How have authors treated this topic?
- What are the main issues?
- What are the significant differences in the way they have been discussed?
- All of us are guided by underlying assumptions, deeply held convictions or shared beliefs. Have the authors made theirs explicit? How do these viewpoints affect their interpretations?

Some things to keep in mind:

- Avoid writing summaries of the works or discussing the historical events themselves.
- Assessing other authors' arguments does not free you from coming up with your own thesis.

Fall 2005
HIS 100.31/32
Reading: Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*
Date: due by **Mon 10/17** for class discussion

As you read *The Da Vinci Code*, consider the following questions. Those of you who have already read the book might want to reread parts of it in order to refresh your memory. Type brief responses to each of these questions, and bring them to class with you on Monday.

Questions for reading *The Da Vinci Code*: (due in class Mon 10/17)

1. The publisher of *The Da Vinci Code* released on its website a number of "discussion questions" for interested readers (attached). Are these the appropriate questions for students of history to be asking of this book? Why or why not?

2. Between the title page of *The Da Vinci Code* and the prologue of the book, Dan Brown has provided an author's disclaimer. On the page which begins with the word FACT, he makes certain assertions about the reliability of his evidence and the truth of his assertions in the book. What difference do you think this page makes for the reader?

3. Throughout the book, when the character Robert Langdon discusses his theories, he frequently begins his discussions with phrases like, "many historians believe that... " or "most scholars think that... ". Rarely, however, does he give the source of his theory or 'evidence'. Is this acceptable or objectionable?

4. What are Robert Langdon's theories on the artwork of Leonardo da Vinci?

5. What are Robert Langdon's theories as to the Holy Grail? (ie what is the grail? What does it signify for the Church)?

6. What role does the Church play in *The Da Vinci Code*?

7. Who/what is The Priory of Sion? Who/what is Opus Dei?

8. What can we learn from *The Da Vinci Code*? What is the value of *The Da Vinci Code* to historians?

9. Does the author of historical fiction have an obligation to be accurate and objective?

Fall 2005
HIS 100.31/32
Reading: Hanegraaff & Maier. *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?*
Screening: *Unlocking the Da Vinci Code*
Date: due by **Wed 10/26** for class discussion

Read *The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction* and view *Unlocking the Da Vinci Code.* These two works take different stands on the historical and art historical material used by Dan Brown in his best-selling novel.

1. How does Patrick Macnee's documentary interpret the material in *The Da Vinci Code*? What are his sources for the evidence he presents?

2. How does this differ from the interpretations of Hanegraaff and Maier? Is there a difference between what Hanegraaff says and what Maier says?

3. What sources do Hanegraaff and Maier use for their arguments?

4. What do you think compels these and other authors to write about *The Da Vinci Code*?

5. As students of history, how should *we* interpret the evidence?

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Essay # 5
Due in class **Wed 11/2**

Analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*
(5-6 pages)

Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* has been on the bestseller list for over a year, and has gathered an enormous following of people from all aspects of American society. It has also been translated into more than 30 different languages and is quickly becoming one of the best-selling novels of all time. The *Da Vinci Code* phenomenon has prompted a number of responses, some of which seek to explore in greater detail the historical notions it contains (*Unlocking Da Vinci's Code* DVD by Patrick Macnee), while others denounce the novel and the theories of the past it presents (*The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?* by Hank Hanegraaff & Paul Maier). What is the significance of *The Da Vinci Code* both in terms of the society of the present-day and in terms of the historical interpretation of the past?

Consider the following questions:

- What is the danger of taking Brown's 'evidence' at face value?
- How does the presentation of evidence differ in the works of Brown, Macnee and Hanegraaff & Maier?
- Why has a work of fiction generated such an extreme response?
- What does the public reaction both for and against this book tell us about society's relationship to its historical past?
- What value does *The Da Vinci Code* hold for historians?

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Essay # 7
Due **Fri 12/9**

Getting Medieval
(1-2 pages)

"I'm gonna get medieval on your ass."
-Marsellus Wallace, to the 'hillbilly rapist' in *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

Scholars have suggested that America's idea of the Middle Ages is one of democratic opportunities, as exemplified by the young, orphaned Arthur in Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), and more recently by William Thatcher's attempt to 'change his stars' in *A Knight's Tale* (2001). But all too often, the Middle Ages are invoked to convey violence, pain, injustice, and repression— both literally (see quote above), and metaphorically, like the current Capital One commercials which feature bands of marauding Huns and Vikings out to attack the users of high-interest credit cards. In other words, Brian Helgeland's idea of 'getting medieval' seems to be in direct opposition to Quentin Tarantino's— whose 'getting medieval' involves a promise of excruciating, bloody attack without quarter.

Faced with such a range of (seemingly) contradictory views of the Middle Ages in popular culture, what is the task facing the 21st century historian? What, if anything, should s/he do to correct contemporary appropriation and misinterpretation of our historical past?